

Water will do when exercise goes under an hour, say experts

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WHEN it comes to big sporting events, they are omnipresent.

Huge buckets of Gatorade get tipped over winning coaches, footballers have a Powerade thrust into their hands as soon as they walk off the field, triathletes grab a bottle of bright orange liquid quicker than they reach for a good friend after a big win.

Sports drinks are everywhere but is the average weekend warrior turning to these calorie-rich thirst-quenchers when a simple glass of water would do?

Most experts agree that sports drinks provide performance benefits for athletes involved in high-intensity exercise for sustained periods, but for many of us they may just be adding unnecessary sugar to our diets.

Susie Burrell, one of Australia's leading sports dietitians and nutritionists, says sports drinks are necessary only for those participating in endurance activities for more than an hour.

"A sports drink is warranted as athletes competing in these conditions will need extra fuel at this time to remain optimally hydrated," Burrell says.

Sports drinks claim to rapidly deliver a mix of electrolytes and carbohydrates to the body. Strenuous exercise can deplete vital minerals in the body and cause dehydration. This weakens muscles and makes them vulnerable to cramp and fatigue.

The formula found in drinks such as Gatorade and Powerade is said to help replenish electrolytes and assist hydration.

Burrell, who has worked as a sports dietitian for NRL clubs and Super 15 rugby players, says that even athletes at this level should use sports drinks carefully.

Australian Institute of Sport sports nutrition clinical services manager Dr Liz Broad says it is important for people to remember the intended use of sports drinks before buying them.

"They are designed for use during sport and endurance-based activities of high-intensity and long duration such as triathlons and in these circumstances they are more effective than water alone," she says.

Sports drinks tend to be overused because people do not understand the situations in which they should be consumed.

"People might do a 45-minute run and think they need a sports drink, but this sort of exercise won't be limited by the availability of carbohydrates," she says.

Staminade technical manager Daran Sritharan disagrees, saying the benefits of performance beverages are not limited to athletes.

"Staminade is formulated in such a way that it replaces the carbohydrates and electrolytes lost during any activity which involves heavy sweating or fluid loss," he says.

Sritharan suggests sports drinks provide rehydration benefits that water alone cannot.

"Although water is a natural choice to quench thirst, water turns off the thirst mechanism before hydration is complete. Water also lacks electrolytes and carbohydrates to replace what is lost from the body."

Many experts, including Burrell and Broad, suggest that consumers be cautious when making the choice between sports drinks and water.

Burrell says an average bottle of performance drink contains 45 grams (about nine teaspoons) of sugar.

Australian Beverages Council chief executive Geoff Parker emphasises the importance of nutritional education. "There are a number of food and beverages that are acidic and high in sugar. Whole fruit is high in sugar, so it is about consumers being educated and aware."

Burrell says sports drinks may be adding unnecessary calories to the average person's daily diet. "For the average non-athlete, child athlete or recreational trainer, sports drinks are simply a high-sugar drink providing extra calories without any other nutritional benefit," she says.

Depleted salts and other electrolytes in active individuals can cause cramping but Burrell suggests anyone who consumes sports drinks to fend off muscle spasms should look for another solution. "People who cramp do not need sugar, they are much better to use the rehydration salts found in pharmacies so you can manage the cramps without the sugar." she says.

Many nutritionists and dentists are concerned about the effect of sports drinks on teeth.

Dr Ron Ehrlich, from the Sydney Holistic Dental Centre, says regular consumption of sports drinks poses a threat to dental health.

"The main issue with these drinks is their acidity, sugar content and buffering capacity, which can predispose someone to erosion and dental decay," Ehrlich says.

When it comes to hydrating during exercise, Ehrlich says: "Water is still the best, maybe with a pinch of Himalayan or Murray river salt."

Broad says the relationship between sports drinks and dental damage should be considered.

"It is an issue, but it's the same with any drink that contains carbohydrates in a slightly acidic environment, such as fruit juices.

"There is a potential environment for damage, but we encourage athletes to rinse their mouths with water after consumption," Broad says.

The consensus seems to be that sports drinks provide much needed hydration and electrolyte replenishment for individuals who engage in high-intensity or endurance based exercise.

However, water may still be the best option for those who exercise at a moderate intensity for less than an hour at a time and especially for those who are exercising to reduce their weight.